Dr. J. R. N. Owen

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Frontier Doctor and Leader of Death Valley's Camel Caravan

by

Jean & LeRoy Johnson

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KEEPSAKE No. 36

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Dr. J.R.N. Owen

Frontier Doctor

and

Leader of Death Valley's Camel Caravan

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Titled "Camels in Nevada," this drawing appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in 1877. It conjures images of the three camels that traversed Death Valley in 1861, although those three were used for packing only, not for riding.

On March 7, 1861, a trail-hardened caravan made its way down Furnace Creek Wash into Death Valley. It was the reconnaissance party of the U.S. and California Boundary Commission composed of 15 men, almost two dozen sorry looking mules, and 3 heavily laden camels. Their charge was to locate water holes and forage for the future surveyors of the boundary between California and the U.S. territories. This quasi-scientific expedition was led by a medical doctor (and sometime miner) whose name was Joseph Richardson Nimmo Owen.

Sylvester Mowry, the boundary commissioner, chose Dr. Owen to lead the reconnaissance based on his army background, his age (he was 42), and the respect his fellow miners held for him. Owen was sympathetic, as was Mowry, to the cause of the South in the dispute over states' rights and slavery, which may have been another reason why Sylvester chose Dr. Owen to lead the reconnaissance.

The Boundary Commission was authorized and funded by Congress in 1860 to delineate the eastern boundary of California. With the discovery of valuable minerals along the boundary, the state's new inhabitants who flocked to the fledgling boom towns needed local governments to handle both civil and criminal disputes. Because both ends of the long oblique line were situated in bodies of water (Lake Tahoe to the north and the Colorado River to the south) and because it crossed extremely rugged and varied terrain, no one was sure which lands lay in the state of California and which still remained in the territories of the United States.

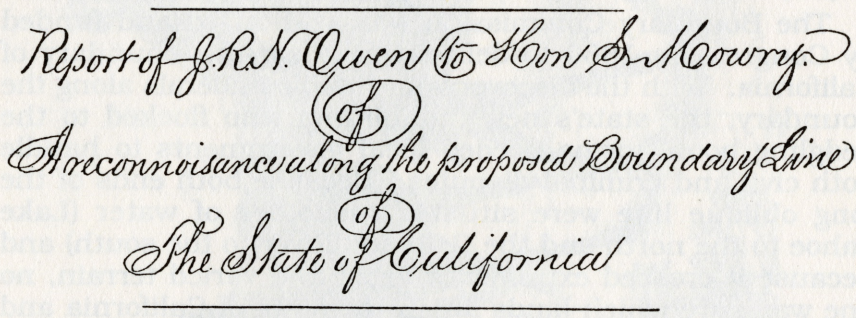
Boundary Commissioner Mowry arrived in San Francisco October 24, 1860, to begin work on the line. He immediately sent Lieutenant Joseph C. Ives, the Commission's astronomer, to the Colorado River a couple miles south of Fort Mojave to establish the southern end point of the oblique line where the 35th parallel crossed the river.

At the end of November 1860, just a couple of months after Dr. Owen traveled from Butte County to prospect in the Coso mining district, he and his fellow miners were in

Los Angeles having been hired by Sylvester Mowry as members of the U.S. and California Boundary Commission.

Commissioner Mowry gave Dr. Owen the charge "to examine the general character of the Country and to report ... upon the same."[1] Specifically, they were to find forage and water sources along the oblique line, but there was more to the reconnaissance than that. Aaron Van Dorn, a skilled and highly respected surveyor from San Francisco, was to make a map of the region. He also wrote a detailed account of the reconnaissance sojourn, which was published in the Sacramento *Union* during the summer of 1861.[2] James McLeod, assistant astronomer, took sextant shots on several stars to determine latitude. He also took barometric readings for elevation, and from these data the world first learned that Death Valley was below sea level.

After a long and unpleasant wait due to heavy rains in Southern California, the commission members finally left Los Angeles on January 11, 1861, and headed for the camp



Cover title of Dr. Owen's report on the camel reconnaissance through Death Valley.

1 J. R. N. Owen, "Report of J. R. N. Owen to Hon. S. Mowry of A Reconnoisance Along the Proposed Boundary Line of The State of California" (California State Land Commission, Sacramento, April 15, 1861).

2 Sacramento, Calif. *Union*. June 25, 29, July 9, 11, 13, 31, Aug. 7, 10, 1961.

already established by Lieutenant Ives on the bank of the Colorado River. They traveled via Williamson (Soledad) Pass because the rains had made Cajon Pass impassable for wagons.

At the Colorado River camp, the party waited for the camels to arrive from Los Angeles. Although four camels had been assigned to the reconnaissance, one of them, Seid, was killed in the corral at Los Angeles by Tuili, the large hybrid male camel.

Because Edward F. Beale had such success with camels in the southwestern deserts, Mowry decided to use them for packing, but little did he realize how camels and mules hated one another upon first acquaintance. Some of the men were mounted on ponies or riding mules; but the pack animals were in poor condition, and Ives wouldn't relinquish his better mules for use on the reconnaissance—a disastrous mistake.

On February 9, Dr. Owen led the reconnaissance northwestward along California's oblique boundary as determined by Lieut. Ives's preliminary calculations of the southern terminus of the line. After the second day, they were forced to make their first of several detours from the line to obtain water and find forage for the pack mules.

Farther up the line, as the reconnaissance party followed the boundary into the Amargosa Desert north of Death Valley Junction (after still another detour west of the line for water at Resting Spring east of Tacopa, California) the mules were in such desperate need of recruitment that Owen decided to again detour westward from the boundary line to make camp at the various springs and grass along the eastern edge of Death Valley.

There was much discussion, and probably some playful wagering about the elevation of Death Valley. Was it or was it not below sea level? Aaron Van Dorn, surveyor for the expedition, measured the elevation at their camp at Travertine Springs in Furnace Creek Wash. His account in the *Union* said:

> It was nine o'clock when the barometer (cistern barometer No. 1356, by James Green, New York) was suspended, when it was found to read 30.038 in., its temperature being 75 degrees, and that of the atmosphere 67 degrees, with the sky perfectly calm

Amargosa Valley
Amargosa River
U.S. and California Boundary
Amargosa Mountains
Death Valley
Sink of the Amargosa
Panamint Mountains
Sandy Plain
Dry Salt Lake
Basin
Panamint
Towns Pass
Dry Lake
Pah-ute-ay-ta
or
Owens Lake

and clear. This reading indicated that we were already at or near the level of the sea, while the bottom of the Valley was still several hundred feet below us."[3]

About Travertine Springs Van Dorn said,

The various springs are of different degrees of temperature, ranging from 60 to 80 degrees. The water being very pleasant to the sense, I indulged in frequent baths, and found, from the strong detergent principle of the alkali, the result to be a cracking and peeling of the cuticle of the skin.

From their next camp located at the seep above the Death Valley Elementary School near the old headquarters buildings, Van Dorn and McLeod rode down to the salt plain to take his barometric measurements.

We dismounted at its margin and walked out about a hundred yards, where we suspended the barometer ... Assuming the barometer to read just 30.000 at the sea line as the upper station, with both thermometers at 50 deg., the last reading would give the depression, by La Place's formulae, to be -377 1/3 feet.

◀ *North.* Map. The California boundary reconnaissance map drawn by Aaron Van Dorn in spring 1861 is the first time the name *Death Valley* appeared on a map. Farley's map of the Southern California silver mines published in 1862 is based, in part, on this map. The map consisted of 3 sheets; this is the sheet of the Death Valley area. One other sheet is extant—the route from Little Lake to Visalia. The first sheet covering the first ten camps from the Colorado River to just north of Shoshone is missing. The two extant sheets are in the Williamson collection dated 1874 in the National Archives, Washington D.C. Numbers on the map correspond to camp numbers in Owen's report. Until LeRoy Johnson recognized the map for what it was, its origin remained unknown.

Note that Death Valley looks like a lake. Two pieces of data indicate the valley floor was covered with water—McLeod's references to the lake in his barometric logs and Van Dorn's map. The winter of 1860-61 brought more rain to Southern California than the previous eleven years, and torrential storms struck the mountains surrounding Death Valley where the run-off inundated the entire salt pan. William Lewis Manly gave a firsthand account of one of these storms that same winter. He and Charles Alvord were camped in the Panamint Range prospecting when "a heavy rain set in, and loosened many rocks that thundered down the mountain-side; one as big as a nail keg coming within a foot of our tent when we were asleep." There are recent reports of people paddling across the valley in a canoe. (Courtesy National Archives.)

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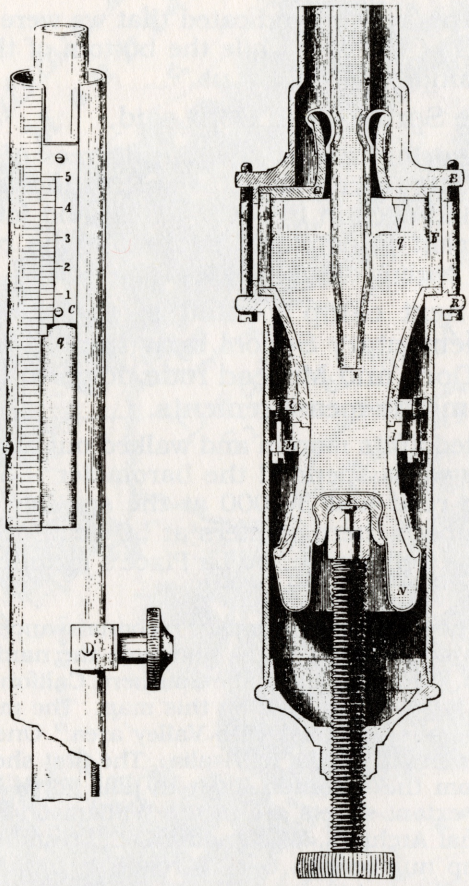
3 Elevation of the camp was about 320 feet.



Detail of Green's mountain barometer. During the 1830s and 40s, James Green perfected his mountain barometer, and it became the standard for the Smithsonian Institution and government expeditions for determining elevational differences between stations along a survey line.

The Green barometer, renowned for its portability and ease of cleaning, consisted of a slender 32-inch glass tube filled with mercury attached to a reservoir containing a small, flexible leather pouch also filled with mercury, the whole being enclosed in a protective brass tube. An adjustment screw at the bottom of the cistern permitted the user to "zero" the instrument before each reading, and Green added a vernier (a sliding marker that worked with a stationary scale) to the brass tube so measurements could be taken to a thousandth of an inch. Accuracy was necessary since an error of only one-tenth of an inch (at 70°F) was equivalent to 95 feet in elevation.

For the first time, Death Valley was officially measured and recorded as being well below sea level.

The trek posed hardships on the men who often had to walk to give their bedraggled mounts relief. After several days at Travertine Springs and another camp near today's Park Village at Cow Creek, a poor camp was made at the head of Salt Creek where some of the '49ers had camped eleven years before. It is now called McLean Spring and is in sight of the sand dunes to the north. Van Dorn said, "Here again we find the trace of the emigrant encampment, bones of cattle in plenty, and the less perishable parts of their abandoned wagons, trace chains, broken pots, etc."

The mules were still in such poor condition it would have been foolhardy to take them into the unknown country north of Death Valley. Therefore, the party again detoured west; this time all the way to the Coso mining district west of Darwin with the hope that supplies could be obtained there. From that point they could travel north on the new road from the Coso district, up Owens Valley to the Mono mining district, and from there, north to Esmeralda, Bodie, and Aurora.

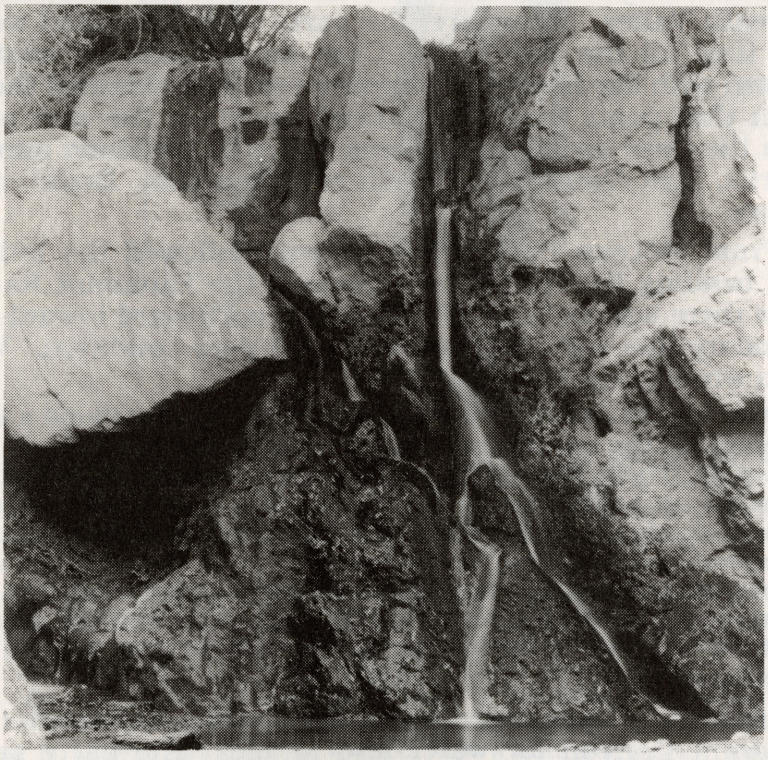
From McLean Spring, the caravan followed the Indian trail heading for Towne Pass through the Panamint Range since there was no hope of continuing northward toward the boundary line with the mules is such poor condition. Van Dorn wrote about their route:

> Our course described a great semicircle, curving round a lofty spur of the mountains projecting into the valley from the south [Tucki Mountain], and entering a lateral valley which runs up southward to the Pass. Our march was along a constantly ascending grade, like the half turn of an enormous spiral staircase, and at the end of it ... we had attained four thousand feet above the valley. Two of the mules belonging to the pack-train broke down utterly, and when relieved of their load refused to be either led or driven and had to be abandoned.

Instead of crossing Towne Pass, they detoured into Emigrant Canyon for water and forage. The party split; some staying at Emigrant Spring and some continuing up the canyon a mile to Upper Emigrant Spring. From that point, they followed the miners' trail up the steep western

side-slope and dropped into Jayhawker Canyon above Jayhawker Spring. The side-slope was too steep for the camels to negotiate with packs so the weary mules did double duty on the short, steep pitch. Jayhawker Canyon led to the pass east of Pinto Peak. From here they headed south to the springs near today's ranger station in Wildrose Canyon where they arrived with considerable difficulty after dark. On the way down Wildrose Canyon, Owen reported:

> We were surprised to find the mule that we had left the day before, drawn up under the shade of a large rock, and looking as miserable as possible.... One of the men pulled off one of his leather leggings, and called for a contribution for "Curley," and I believe every man in the train divided the contents of his Canteen with our travel worn friend.



Darwin Falls was named by Erasmus Darwin French whose prospecting party came through the canyon enroute to Death Valley in late 1859 or early 1860 looking for the Gunsight lead.

The trail around Darwin Falls is now used by wild burrows, but it was first an Indian trail followed by prospectors and miners. View is west looking up-canyon from a higher point along the trail.

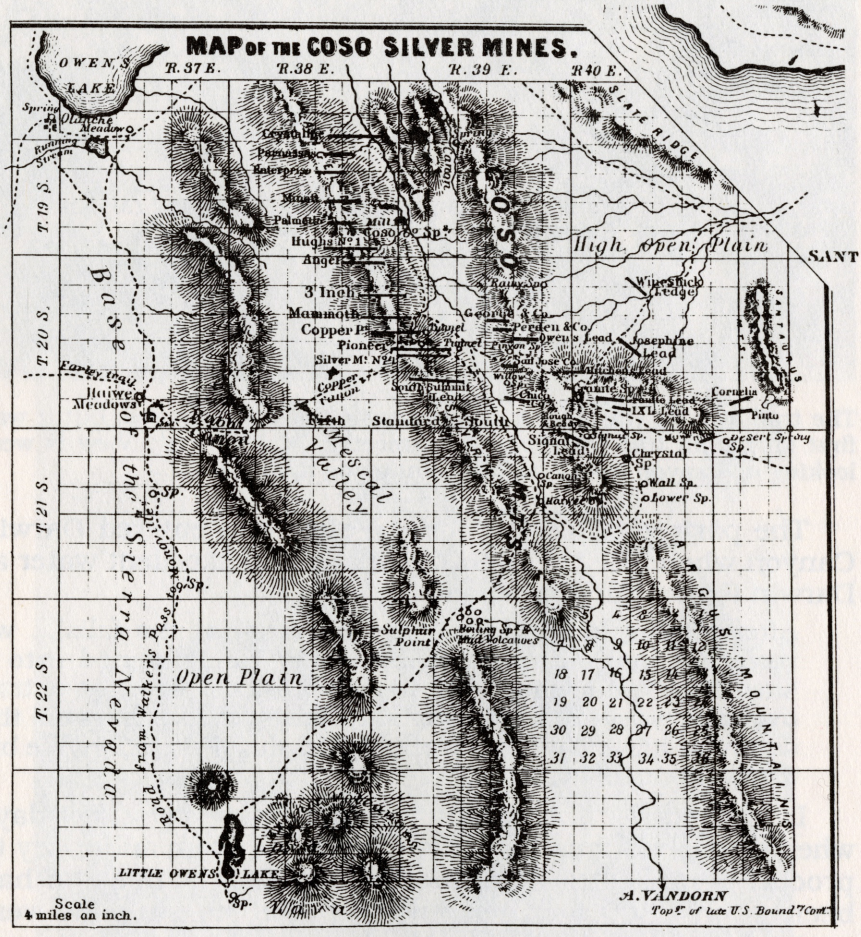
The party crossed Panamint Valley and entered Darwin Canyon where they enjoyed the shade and excellent water at Darwin Falls. Van Dorn said,

> After resting in the shade of the rocks [at the falls]... we retraced our steps for half a mile, and turned into a smaller arroyo coming from the south, and following the trail over the steep mountain which skirts the canyon on the south, at the end of two miles it led us down again into the big arroyo above the falls.

Dr. Owen left the reconnaissance party for a few days when it reached the Coso area to visit his claim and to try to procure supplies to continue the reconnaissance—he had been given $300 for this purpose. But no supplies were available at Coso, and when he learned that supplies were almost nonexistent at the mining camps of Mono, Bodie, and Esmeralda to the north, his only choice was to cross the Sierra Nevada via Walkers Pass to Visalia.

Thus ended the reconnaissance for the survey of California's oblique boundary line.

Dr. Owen wrote his report to Commissioner Mowry in mid-April while the party camped near Visalia. It was concise and to the point, commenting mostly on the lack of



Owen's lead was mapped by Van Dorn in this insert on Minard H. Farley's *Map of the Newly Discovered Tramontane Silver Mines in Southern California and Western New Mexico* (now Nevada) dated 1861, published 1862. (Courtesy California State Library.)

grass and poor quality of the water along the route. He also referred to the camp sites using numbers that corresponded to the numbers on Van Dorn's map. There was no need for his report to be more detailed since, as he said, "For a more full and accurate description of the Topography, Geology, and Mineralogy of the Country, I have the honor to refer you to the reports of Messrs Van Dorn and Biesta which will be submitted with this."[4] The last part of his report reveals that Owen held his desert comrades in high esteem:

> Of the Gentlemen connected by particular assignment of duty with the scientific department of the commission, and the manner in which they have discharged their duties while with me, it must be for the Commissioner directly to judge— For myself, I feel only free to express the constant gratification afforded me by their companionship during the trip, and the excellent [sic] of their example of alacrity and cheerful endurance under its privations and tedious roughness. Of the men, I need only say that the party could hardly have been better composed for its purposes; and I am satisfied that, but for a commendable interest on the part of each one, in carrying out the objects of the Commission, and preserving its property, it would have been impossible to have brought our train thru one half of the route by which we came.[5]

During that summer, the Department of Interior in Washington D.C. decided to discontinue the Boundary Commission. Therefore, in September of 1861, Ives turned the reports and observations over to U.S. Surveyor General Edward F. Beale. Beale, in turn, loaned parts of the information to California Surveyor General J. F. Houghton in 1862 for his survey of the northern section of California's eastern line. California Geologist Josiah D. Whitney and Col. Robert Stockton Williamson saw all or parts of the reports before 1865.[6] Then the reconnaissance reports, the

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4 J. R. N. Owen, Op. cit.

5 Ibid.

6 J. D. Whitney, *Geology, Volume I, Report of Progress and Synopsis of the Field-Work, from 1860 to 1864* (Geological Survey of California. Philadelphia: Caxton Press. 1865), 471; R. S. Williamson, *On the Use of the Barometer on Surveys and Reconnaissances* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1868), xxv, xxvii.

barometric log books, and the map dropped from sight for over 110 years. The recent discovery of these documents is an exciting story in itself.

Dr. Owen is an example of the independent, adventursome yet solid citizen that brought civilization to the rough frontier. This review of his life provides insight into the west as it once was.

Joseph Owen was a native of Virginia born March 1, 1818, but his family soon moved to Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, where his father Reverend John Owen helped establish the First Methodist Church there in 1818. At the young age of 13, Joseph entered the University of Alabama as one of its first students where he studied for two years—January 1831 through December 1832. For about three months, from February 27 to May 17, 1836, Joseph served as a private in Dent Company in Chisolm's Battalion of volunteers from Alabama engaged in the Florida war against the Seminole Indians.

At the age of 18, he entered Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, and from 1836 to 1838 took the first and second courses in medicine. He specialized in the diseases of women and children; his sixteen-page, hand written "Inaugural Dissertation" titled *Procidentia Uteri* earned him a "Degree of Doctor of Medicine" on February 20, 1838.

In 1846, Owen signed up as a private to fight in the Mexican war. He was appointed Hospital Steward and served in that capacity until he mustered out in May 1847.

In 1850, the year after his father died, Owen came round the Horn and settled in Butte County where he mined for gold, apparently with little success. Five years later, in 1855, he was still in Butte County where he sold six mining claims totaling 142 acres "more or less" for five dollars. The property was measured in rods, poles, and links with large pine trees and white oaks used as the boundary markers. In the spring of 1856, as Ophir changed its name to Oroville—Spanish for *City of Gold*—and achieved recognition by wresting the county seat from Bidwell Bar, Dr. Owen

hung out his shingle and advertised his services as a physician in the Butte Record.

After a ditch was completed from the south fork of the Feather River to Oroville, the "dry diggings" mining increased. Soon Oroville was the fifth largest town in California and considered by some to be the wickedest town in the state. One Sunday afternoon, fifteen fights were reported along Montgomery street alone. Obviously there were plenty of patients for Dr. Owen.

Owen's interest in newly opened mining prospects took him from Oroville to the new strikes made by his friends in the Coso Mountains east of the southern Sierra Nevada. A report from the Coso mines in the San Francisco *Evening Bulletin* September 13, 1860, said, "Dr. J.R.N. Owen, Miles Chapin, Samuel McClellan[d], H.U. Jennings, and S.W. Gambrel are among the last arrivals from Butte. They have several undeveloped claims each." *Owen's Lead* is found on Minard Farley's 1861 map of the silver districts of southern California in the insert drawn by Aaron Van Dorn while he was on the boundary reconnaissance led by Dr. Owen. Chapin, McClelland, Jennings, and Gambrel also became members of the Boundary Commission reconnaissance under Owen's leadership in addition to J. H. Lillard who was "one of the adventurous party of silver hunters that left Oroville in March last and subsequently discovered the Coso mines."[7]

Owen gained the reputation of being a fine marksman with his shooting ability when he kept the mining camp supplied with fresh meat when "with no other firearm than a Colt's navy revolver he shot an antelope last week, killing him dead in his tracks, at a distance of 150 paces."[8] His accuracy and interest in firearms became prominent again two additional times during his life.

His continued interest in new mining prospects enticed Owen to lead the boundary reconnaissance into the deserts southeast of the Coso District. The reconnaissance provided the perfect opportunity to scout new territories about

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7 San Francisco *Alta California*, July 28, 1860.

8 San Francisco *Bulletin*, Sept. 13, 1860.

which myths of fabulous silver leads were already developing. These myths were based on a piece of float with a high silver content that was carried out of the Panamint Range by one of the first white men to pass through that range in January 1850—the party that became known as the Death Valley '49ers. If fact, Owen undoubtedly spoke to William Lewis Manly, one of the Death Valley '49ers, while they were both at the Bella Union Hotel in Los Angeles in late November 1860.[9]

Owen left Nevada to serve for a short time as a surgeon in the Confederate Army toward the end of the Civil War. He was listed as one of the Officers and Hospital Stewards serving General Hospital No. 7 at Raleigh, North Carolina, in March 1865. He apparently returned shortly after the war.

Sometime after leading the reconnaissance party, Owen went north to the bustling mines of the Comstock lode near Virginia City where he bought an interest in the Tennessee Ledge in the Virginia mining district. But he maintained his doctor's office at 20 South A Street.

By 1869, Dr. Owen had moved to the silver boomtown of Hamilton (45 miles west of today's Ely, Nevada, off Highway 50) and advertised himself as an M.D. and Surgeon. In February 1870 his ad read: "Dr. J. R. N. Owen, Practitioner of Medicine and Surgery. Office: On Hamilton Street, in Vanderlip & Pearson's Building, nearly opposite Spalding's Saloon."[10]

The White Pine Chamber of Commerce at Ely said enough silver was found in the mines around Hamilton to pay most of the Union's Civil War debt. Hamilton had a population of about 5,000 at this time, over 50 bars, 29 lawyers, and two doctors, one being Dr. Owen. In 1871 the best hotel in town had 17 rooms on the top floor with a fireplace in each room. A cup of coffee and a steak cost $1.00, but chickens cost $5.00 each, and canned fruits and vegetables were $1.00 per can. A jackass-load of wood cost $3 to $5.00.

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9 Los Angeles *Star*, Nov. 24 & Dec. 1, 1860.

10 Hamilton, Nev. *White Pine News*, Feb. 7, 1870.

While in Hamilton, Owen experienced the plight of many a frontier doctor—the problem of collecting payment for services rendered. This problem developed into a life and death confrontation for Dr. Owen in late May of 1870. He had administered to Judge Richard H. Allen's wife who had pneumonia. He told Judge Allen that unless he paid for past services, the judge could find another doctor to care for his wife. This angered Allen who went on a drinking spree for a couple of days during which he threatened Owen's life more than once.

At about 8 o'clock on the morning of May 24, on the main street of Hamilton, the two men had a chance encounter. Dr. Owen, thinking Allen was pulling a gun on him, fired a fatal shot into the Judge who expired three hours later. The *White Pine Daily News*, May 25, 1870, gave a remarkably vivid and detailed account of the shooting. It said that the evening before:

> Allen approached Dr. Owen, apparently with hostile intentions, and making demonstrations as though he had a knife or other weapon in his coat sleeve; seeing which, Owen drew a pistol and ordered him to halt, which he did. Owen then covered him with the pistol, and told him to walk away, which command he obeyed. Between the time of the last difficulty and morning, several friends warned the Doctor to look out for Allen, as he was considered a desperate and dangerous man. [The next morning:] Dr. Owen ... saw Allen approaching, but, thinking he was over his spree, and would let the affair drop, approached him and offered him his hand.
>
> Allen made a demonstration as though about to draw a weapon, when Dr. Owen stepped back and drew his pistol. He then told Allen not to come near him again, as he [Owen] did not want anything to do with him. Allen remarked: "You may have to have something to do with me, whether you like it or not." Friends then interfered, caught Dr. Owen, and rushed Allen our of the room.
>
> After waiting for him to get off the street, Dr. Owen started to his office for the purpose of lying down, in order to avoid meeting Allen while the latter was drunk. Reaching the front of Armitage's drug store, Dr. Owen saw Allen approaching him, and, deeming himself in danger, drew his pistol and fired two shots—he first striking Allen two inches above and half an inch to the left of the navel, passing along the line dividing the umbilical and epigastric regions diagonally through the body,

and making its exit through the upper and left portion of the lumbar region, cutting the superior mesentric artery in its course, passing out through his clothes, through the pantaloons and drawers of C. H. Fuller (who was a few feet to the rear and right); striking the sidewalk, and, ricocheting, passed through a second story window of the Pollard House and lodged in the bed of Mr. Gehr. Allen threw up both hands and stood for a moment apparently stupefied with fear or pain; then turned, clasped his right hand upon his right side, took a step or two into the street, then changed hands, clasping his left side with the left hand, and started to run across the street diagonally, holding his side, leaning to the right and looking back over his left shoulder.

When about 30 feet distant, Dr. Owen fired again, the ball striking in the street near Cook's store, 150 yards away. Officer Connelly sprang to Dr. Owen and seized the pistol, while Marshal O'Keefe rushed across the street and caught Allen. The latter was given in charge of two gentlemen, with whom he walked up to his residence.... O'Keefe then said: "I guess he scraped you a little;" to which Allen replied: "Major, I'm wounded pretty badly." The Marshal then asked what was the cause of the difficulty... [Allen replied] it was all his own fault, and that he deserved it; that he had forced the fight, and it served him right.... Ten minutes later, Major O'Keefe visited Allen at his residence, when the latter called him to his bedside and said: "Major, go and tell Dr. Owen I want to see him; I want to ask his forgiveness, and to forgive him." Dr. Owen was sent for, but on reaching Mr. Kittrell's office, learned that Allen was then unconscious and dying, and concluded not to go. Dr. Owen expressed the deepest regret that the necessity for such an occurrence had been forced.[11]

The newspaper went on to say that Allen "was a man of violent temper, and was generally looked upon by those who knew his history as a vindictive and dangerous character" and that he had been reported to have participated in "several shooting and cutting affairs." Bail was set at $5,000, which Owen readily paid. Over a period of three days, thirty-four witnesses testified before Justice J. K. Davis, and on June 2, the Justice handed down a decision of justifiable homicide and the defendant was exonerated. Justice Davis "remarked that the case had been gone into

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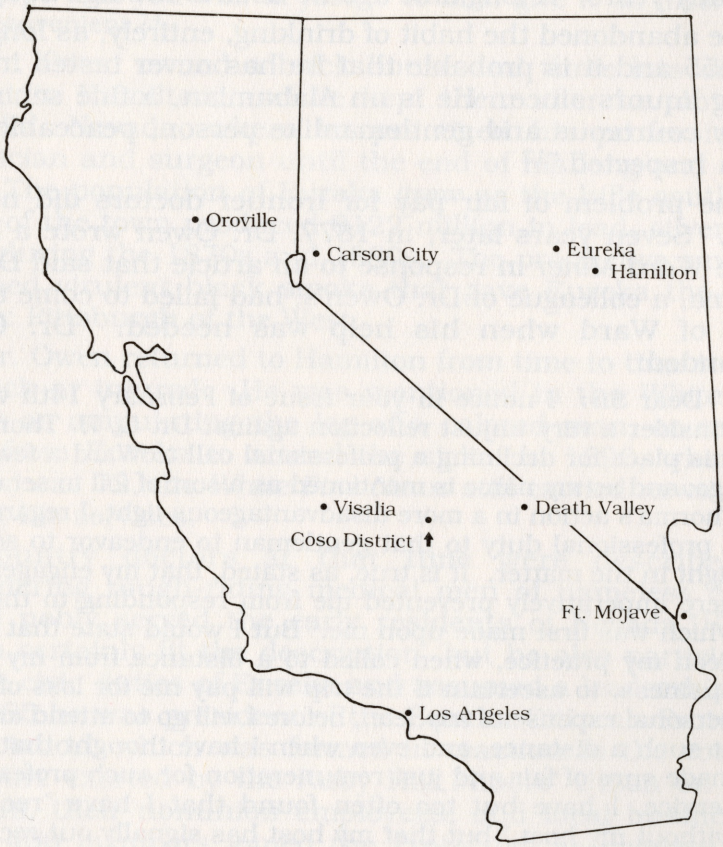
[11] Ibid., May 25, 1870.

fully, three days occupied in hearing evidence, and the fullest latitude allowed on both sides; that he had listened attentively to the evidence and weighed it well, but had seen nothing in it which would justify him in holding the defendant."[12]



Map. Dr. J. R. N. Owen spent most his adult life as a frontier doctor and part time miner in California and Nevada. He was in the Oroville area from 1850 to 1860 and in the Coso mining district for a short time before and after he led the Reconnaissance for the U.S. and California Boundary Commission in 1861. He migrated to Virginia City where he resided until 1869 when he moved to Hamilton and then to Eureka where he spent the rest of his life.

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[12] Ibid., June 2, 1870.

The Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise* (May 25, 1870) had a short and garbled account of the incident, but it characterized Dr. Owen as being "a skillful physician, an analytical chemist and an abstemious gentleman." The editor of the *Nevada Appeal* said, "Dr. Owen we have known for many years. A long time ago he used to indulge in sprees but he abandoned the habit of drinking, entirely, as long ago as 1855 and it is probable that he has never tasted intoxicating liquors since. He is an Alabamian, a fine scholar a highly courteous and gentlemanlike person, peaceable and much respected."[13]

The problem of fair pay for frontier doctors did not go away. Seven years later, in 1877, Dr. Owen wrote a letter to the *Ward Miner* in response to an article that said Doctor Thorma, a colleague of Dr. Owen's, had failed to come to the town of Ward when his help was needed. Dr. Owen responded:

> Dear Sir: I notice in your issue of February 14th what I consider a very unjust reflection against Dr. G. H. Thorma of this place for declining a professional call to Ward a few days ago; and as my name is mentioned as a sort of foil to set off Dr. Thorma's action in a more disadvantageous light, I regard it as a professional duty to that gentleman to endeavor to set you right in the matter. It is true, as stated, that my engagements here imperatively prevented me from responding to the call, which was first made upon me. But I would state that it has been my practice, when called to a distance from my home business, to ascertain if the trip will pay me for loss of time, personal expense of trip, etc., before I will go to attend any one at such a distance, and even when I have thought that I had made sure of fair and just remuneration for such professional service, I have but too often found that I have "reckoned without my host," but that my host has signally out reckoned me.
>
> Dr. Thorma was perfectly justified in declining any call so far away from the sphere of his immediate home business when his usual customers have the first right to demand his presence and services.... I am sure, sir, that if you had lost as much time, paid out as much money in traveling expense, and undergone as much exposure in serving for naught or for inadequate recompense, your neighbors at a distance, as

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[13] *Carson Daily Appeal.* May 26, 1870.

> either Dr. Thorma or myself have done, you would have spared yourself the trouble of penning the stricture alluded to, and a very estimable gentleman the possible annoyance of finding himself reflected upon.
>
> I have written this without consulting Dr. Thorma, and hope that you will, in justice to him, give it an insertion if convenient.[14]

Dr. Owen owned a brick house and three lots on Mill Street in Hamilton, and he kept them after he moved to Eureka, Nevada, where he practiced his profession as physician and surgeon until the end of his long and active life. The population of Eureka grew as the hills south and west of the town produced $122 million in lead, silver, and gold during the 1870s and 1880s. The productive smelters belched virulent black smoke that gave Eureka the nickname: Pittsburgh of the West.

Dr. Owen returned to Hamilton from time to time to treat its sick or injured. He was mentioned in the *White Pine News* as amputating the leg of a colored man, or coming over from Eureka to attend the sick. In 1890, when the doctor was 72, the *White Pine News* still carried news items about his services.

Country doctors at that time were described as "wandering rough-riding medical men of nameless career [who] nobly served the early residents of Nevada."[15] Dr. Owen certainly fit the description, but he also participated in the civic duties of Eureka and assumed a leadership roll. In 1885 he was president of the Eureka Citizen's Protective Association, which was formed in reaction to the coercive pressure exerted by the Ruby Hill Miners' Union on mine owners, their nonunion employees, and local businesses. Over 400 members joined the Protective Association, and Dr. Owen published the manifesto of the group, which was: to work for the "equal protection of the laws and the right to manage their own affairs in their own way without dictation or coercion from any source whatsoever ... [and] to maintain

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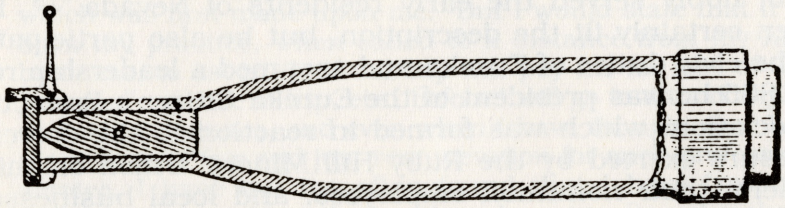
[14] Ward, Nev. *Ward Miner*, Feb. 21, 1877.

[15] Inventory of the County Archives of Nevada, No. 6—Eureka County, (Reno, Nev.: The Historical Records Survey, 1939), 151.

and uphold the supremacy of the law and in frustrating any attempt to overthrow and subvert it." The same day the manifesto was published, the *White Pine News* reported that twelve members of the Ruby Hill Union were indicted for conspiracy to keep nonunion men from working in the Bowman mine.

In 1887, at the age of 69, Dr. Owen was appointed Eureka County physician to "attend indigent sick persons at County Hospital & ... furnish his own medicine & liquors at a salary of $125.00 per month, this appointment to run from June 1, 1887 and from month to month."[16] The hospital at which Dr. Owen attended the sick and indigent consisted of "a tract of 62 acres, several houses, two springs, 1,200 feet of water pipe, a 259-foot tunnel, a 5,000-gallon water tank, and various other appurtencances" heated by stoves. It sounds as though the property were originally a mine site. The hospital and grounds were purchased in 1880 for $5,700. During the time he was county physician, Dr. Owen was also appointed Deputy County Clerk.

As Dr. Owen aged, so did Eureka. With a drop in the price of silver in 1890, life in Eureka slowed as the population dwindled. But Dr. Owen, age 72 at this time, found additional interests to occupy his time. He filed for a patent



Drawing from Owen's patent application. It permitted a powerful gun to have a barrel just long enough to hold the projectile. A special trap door in front of the barrel held the projectile in place while a charge of compressed air filled the chamber behind it.

16 Eureka [Nevada] Board of County Commissioners' Minutes, May 23, 1887.

on an improved mechanism for a pneumatic gun, or cannon, that he invented. The *White Pine News* of September 12, 1891, said, "J. R. N. Owen of Eureka, Nevada, has been granted a patent for a pneumatic gun. We'll bet the doctor's invention is a destructive weapon."

Owen had a considerable interest in reading as indicated by his personal property assessment in 1891. It was valued at $100, half the value of his house in Hamilton, whcih was comprised of "Furniture & Library."

At the age of 81, Dr. Owen was authorized to practice medicine and surgery by the newly established Nevada State Board of Medical Registration and Examination. He paid ten cents to have the certificate recorded on June 13, 1899. Three doctors from Eureka registered to practice under the new act, but many doctors in Nevada declined to do so since the law was not compulsory.

Less than a year later, on May 3, 1900, at the age of 82, Dr. Owen died. The Masonic Order gave him an honorable funeral at which Nevada Governor Reinhold Sadler read the service and officiated at the grave. The Eureka *Sentinel* (May 5, 1900) said in his obituary:

> He had been confined to his bed only about a week, although having been quite feeble for some time, and during the present epidemic he has attended a number of patients and, it is thought, overdid himself in their behalf.... He was a man of brilliant attainments, highly educated, and was an able physician and surgeon, although for the past few years his feeble condition and partial loss of sight interfered with the active practice of his profession. Possessing a high sense of honor, he enjoyed the respect and confidence of the community and his loss will be keenly felt throughout this entire section of the State.

Owen's leadership of the boundary reconnaissance is not only an important (albeit short) slice of Death Valley history, his life is an example of an educated man's adjustment to the west after the glamour of mining had rubbed off. He was a credit to his name and to his fellow man.

A quiet northwestern vista to the Sierra Nevada over the dust of Owens Lake as seen along the camel reconnaissance route from Centennial Flat west of Darwin near the Coso Range.

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